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A close-run thing? Accounting for changing overall turnout in UK General Elections

Abstract:
Turnout at UK General Elections has remained stubbornly below post-war levels in the new millennium. Between 1950 and 1997, official turnout averaged 76% and never fell below 71% (in 1997); since 2001 average turnout has been 12 percentage points lower, at 64%. We investigate several possible explanations for that decline: the lack of competitiveness in recent contests; an increase in ideological similarity between the major parties; and partisan dealignment. Although electoral competitiveness affects turnout, and in the expected directions, it cannot readily account for the sudden drop in participation after 2000. But there is evidence that aggregate levels of partisanship are important: the unusually low turnout levels since 2000 are associated with unusually low levels of partisanship, and there are signs of a 'threshold effect'.

A close-run thing? Accounting for changing overall turnout in UK General Elections

Participation rates at recent UK General Elections have been substantially below past turnout levels. Between 1950 and 1997 official turnout averaged 76% and never fell below 71% (in 1997). Since 2000, however, average turnout has been about 12 percentage points lower, at 64%. The lowest turnout (59%) came in 2001. At each subsequent General Election it recovered somewhat, but at 69% in 2017 it is still some way below even the lowest turnout of the late twentieth century.[1]

Several possible explanations of changing turnout have been offered. One possibility is that less competitive elections depress political participation (e.g. Blais, 2000). Another possible explanation concerns how ideologically distinct the major parties appear to be from each other: the more similar they are, goes the argument, the less that rides on the election result and hence the lower the turnout (Pattie and Johnston, 2001; Heath, 2007). A third often-mooted explanation concerns partisan dealignment: as voters' attachments to political parties become less intense, the incentive to vote diminishes (Heath, 2007).[2] To what extent do these explanations account for the decline and partial recovery of aggregate national turnout in the UK? In this paper, we examine the evidence.

Explaining turnout change

Rational voter theories from Downs (1957) on stress the importance of electoral competitiveness as an influence on turnout, especially in plurality electoral systems such as the UK's. The more certain an election result seems in advance, either nationally or in the voter's home constituency (or both), the lower the incentives for voters to take part, whether they support the anticipated winner or loser. Parties focus their mobilisation and campaign efforts on close contests in marginal seats, boosting turnout there (Green and Gerber, 2015: John and Brannan, 2008; Fieldhouse *et al.*, 2013; Pattie and Johnston, 2003; Johnston and Pattie, 2014; Hartman *et al*., 2017; Denver and Hands, 1985; Pattie and Johnston, 2001).

At the national level, too, elections vary substantially in how close the competition seems to the electorate, as illustrated by plotting national turnout against the absolute percentage point difference between Labour and Conservative in the final public pre-election opinion poll from each of the major polling companies at every UK general election since 1945 (figure 1).[3] The 1992 election was, before the event, widely perceived to be too close to call: not surprisingly turnout then was, at 78%, relatively high. Five years later, Labour's 1997 landslide victory had been widely anticipated long before the election: at 71%, turnout in that contest was the lowest of the post-war period up to that point. Analyses of variations in national-level turnout between 1950 and 1997 show that how close the major parties were to

[1] The change over time in turnout might be somewhat different to that suggested by the 'official' figures, and the difference may vary over time (Electoral Commission, 2016, p. 6; Mellon et al. 2018). However, Mellon et al.'s (2018) 'best estimates' of corrected turnout in recent UK General Elections show broadly the same turnout trends (albeit at different levels) as the official figures.

[2] Generational replacement provides a fourth possible explanation. Over time, younger generations replace older ones in the electorate. But if the new entrants to the electorate are less inclined to turn out than those leaving it, generational replacement may lead to an overall decline in turnout (Franklin, 2004; Grasso, 2016). To study the generational replacement effect adequately would, however, require a somewhat different analytical approach to that adopted here.

[3] Polling data for elections between 1945 and 2010 are taken from Rallings and Thrasher (2012): after 2010, data are taken from Anthony Wells' *UK Polling Report* website (http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/).

each other in the polls just prior to the election was a strong predictor of national turnout: the closer their poll standing, the higher the turnout (Pattie and Johnston, 2001).

Prima facie, the tightness of the national contest provides a plausible explanation for the further decline in turnout at the 2001 election (another widely anticipated Labour landslide) and the slow recovery in turnout since. Labour's lead was seriously eroded in 2005 and before both the 2010 and 2015 elections many polls suggested a close contest between Conservative and Labour. In 2017, meanwhile, although the election outcome seemed a foregone conclusion at the outset of the campaign (with a very large Conservative win expected), the race narrowed rapidly as the campaign progressed (Denver, 2018, 14). Even so, turnout, though higher than 2001, remained below even the late twentieth century low point of 1997. National competitiveness alone cannot fully explain the changing pattern.

A different measure of how competitive an election might be is provided by the proportion of constituencies which are at risk of changing hands in any given election. Where the incumbent party regularly wins by a wide margin, the seat is unlikely to change hands. Other constituencies are held by much smaller margins: a relatively small shift in votes between parties there could change the local winner. The more seats that are marginals, the more responsive the election is likely to be to small shifts in party support. And the more responsive the electoral system, other things being equal, the higher we might expect turnout to be. As the number of marginal constituencies in the UK has fluctuated over time, this is a potential reason for declining turnout.

To illustrate this variation for each election between 1959 and 2017, we use Curtice's (2010, 2015, 2018) calculation of how many Conservative-Labour marginals there were after the previous election (figure 2).[4] Since the late 1950s, the general trend in the number of Conservative-Labour marginals has been downwards, with a particularly steep fall in the early 1970s. Again, the decline in the capacity of the electoral system to respond to small fluctuations in party support does not appear to explain turnout across the time series.

A second potential explanation for variations in national turnout levels is the size of the ideological divide between the Labour and Conservative parties (Pattie and Johnston, 2001; Heath, 2007). The more distinctive their political positions and policies, the more consequential that election result might be perceived to be for shaping the future direction of public policy. In contrast, the closer the two parties' positions seem to be to each other, the less it might matter which emerges in the lead: it is harder to become interested over different variants of the same basic programme than over radically different visions of the national future.

Over time, Britain's two largest parties' policy agendas have converged and diverged (as illustrated by how their election manifestos have been scored on a left-right scale (figure 3 – data from the Manifesto Project: Volkens *et al.*, 2017). The 1950s and early 1960s saw broad political consensus, as the Conservatives accommodated themselves to the welfare state introduced by the 1945 Labour government (Kavanagh and Morris, 1989). During the 1970s and early 1980s, the ideological gap between the parties widened, as Labour moved to the left and the Conservatives to the right (Whiteley, 1983; Gamble, 1988). Repeated electoral defeats caused Labour to move back towards the centre ground in the late 1980s and early

[4] Curtice (2018, 31) defines Conservative-Labour marginals as "seats where neither (Labour nor the Conservatives) would have won more than 55% of the votes cast for Conservative and Labour alone … in the event that nationally the two parties had won exactly the same share of the vote at that election".

1990s, introducing a new period of convergence, a process confirmed after 2005 when the Conservatives in their turn responded to repeated electoral defeats by moving towards the centre (Shaw, 1994; Bale, 2016). More recently, in 2015 and 2017 (the latter under its new leader Jeremy Corbyn), Labour has once more shifted leftwards, widening the gap between the main parties again (Bale, 2015; Quinn, 2016; Dorey, 2017).

We might expect changing ideological differentiation to lead to a decline in turnout during the late 1990s and early 2000s (as the major parties converged) and an increase thereafter, as they began to diverge again. Analyses of the period up till 1997 suggest that the perceived difference between the major parties does affect turnout (Pattie and Johnston 2003; Heath, 2007). However, the consensus years of the 1950s and 1960s are a major challenge to this perspective, as these were years of both convergence and relatively high turnouts. Again, this clearly cannot be the sole factor behind aggregate turnout trends.

A third contender is the changing strength of partisan identification in Britain. Partisanship is a powerful influence on turnout (Jung, 2017; Heath, 2007). Those who identify strongly with a political party are more likely to turn out than those who either identify only weakly with one or do not identify with any party. But over time, the strength of party attachment has declined steadily in the UK (figure 4; Särlvik and Crewe, 1983; Clarke and Stewart, 1998; Denver *et al*., 2012). And while Heath (2007) shows that this process of partisan dealignment was one of the major factors underlying the decline in individual-level turnout, it does not neatly mirror the fluctuations in aggregate turnout over time.

Testing the theories

How well do these three arguments account for aggregate shifts in national turnout since the mid-1940s? There were 20 General Elections in the UK between 1945 and 2017.[5] While we have data on turnout and the average absolute difference between Labour and Conservatives in the final polls for all 20 elections, we are not so fortunate with our other indicators. Curtice's estimates of the number of marginal constituencies are available only for the elections between 1959 and 2017. British Election Study data on the proportion of very strong partisans in the electorate are available only for contests from 1964 on. As for the ideological distance between Labour and Conservatives, the Manifesto Project had not, at the time of writing, yet released left-right scores for the parties' 2017 manifestoes (giving us 19 data points for assessments of the aggregate effects of the ideological gap between the parties). Even so, as we demonstrate below, the patterns are striking. To conserve data as much as possible, we analyse the effect of each possible explanatory variable separately.

Election competitiveness and turnout

We begin by examining how close the national election competition between Labour and Conservatives seemed in the polls in the immediate run-up to the vote, using the average of the percentage point difference between the two parties in the major pollsters' final public polls at every election as our measure of electoral competitiveness. The smaller the absolute difference, the closer the election would have seemed to parties, commentators and voters.

[5] The UK's 1945 General Election was fought while the country was still embroiled in World War Two. As a result, many eligible voters were unable to vote, and the electoral rolls employed were unusually inaccurate (McCallum and Readman, 1947, 31-32): the turnout figure in that election is liable to be unusually misleading, therefore. All analyses reported in the paper have therefore been re-run excluding the 1945 result. The results are substantively unchanged. We therefore report analyse of the full period from 1945 to 2017.

Although there is a negative relationship between turnout and our measure of electoral competitiveness (figure 5a), it is weak. In a bivariate regression, the effect of absolute poll difference on turnout falls short of conventional levels of significance (though it is significant at p=0.10), and the model accounts for just 15% of the variation in turnout (table 1a, model I).

So does the overall competitiveness of the national race really have little to do with national turnout levels? On closer inspection, it seems otherwise. Turnout clearly dropped after 2000. Fitting separate trend lines for the pre- and post-2000 periods suggests there were similar trends between turnout and competitiveness in both periods (figure 5b): while the fit appears stronger in the pre-2000 period, it is still noticeable in the post-millennium elections, as the trend lines are almost parallel. This is confirmed by two further regression models. In the first (table 1a, Model II), we add a dummy variable coded 1 if the election took place after 2000 and 0 if it took place before then. Our rationale for including this dummy is based on the frequently-cited argument that, to a large extent, election turnout is a habitual activity, strengthened through repeated participation (Franklin, 2004). If this is the case, a sudden and substantial drop in turnout at an election is liable to have a lasting effect on later elections, as more electors enter the group which has lost the reinforcing effects of past participation.

On including the dummy variable, the R^2 value increases considerably, from just 15% of the variation in turnout to 82%, with both independent variables highly significant and correctly signed. Overall, the closer the election seemed in advance, the higher the turnout – but with a substantial decline in turnout, whatever the level of competitiveness, in the 21st compared to the 20th century.

That the effect of competitiveness on turnout was fundamentally the same both before and after 2000 is confirmed by our third model (table 1a, model III), which adds an interaction between the competitiveness measure and the post-2000 measure. That interaction (which should capture any differences in the effect of competitiveness on turnout in the different time periods) is statistically insignificant. There is an underlying relationship between how competitive elections appear in advance of polling day, and how high the turnout is – and that relationship has not really changed over time. While it can help us understand fluctuations in turnout from one contest to the next, however, it cannot account for the sudden drop in turnout after 2000.

What of the changing responsiveness of the electoral system, as indexed by the shifting number of marginal seats in play in the run-up to each election? As we would expect, there is a broad positive relationship between the number of marginals at the previous election, and the turnout (figure 6a).[6] However, the relationship is not statistically significant (table 1b, model I) and adding a simple control for pre- and post-2000 contests does not change matters (table 1, model II). Adding an interaction between pre/post-2000 and the number of marginals reveals something unexpected, however (figure 6b, and table 1b, model III). The interaction term is significant and negative, while the main effect of the number of marginals remains insignificant. The responsiveness of the electoral system had no discernible effect on turnout prior to 2000, but it did have an effect thereafter. The surprising suggestion is that the post-2000 effect actually runs counter to expectations. In the post-millennium contests, the

[6] Periodic reviews of constituency boundaries complicate the picture somewhat. New seats were adopted in the 1950, 1955, February 1974, 1983, 1997, 2005 (in Scotland) and 2010 (in England, Wales and Northern Ireland) elections, making the number of marginals in the preceding contest a less accurate reflection of the state of party competition on the ground for these elections than would normally be the case.

greater the potential for the electoral system to be responsive to small fluctuations in party support (i.e. the more marginal seats that might change hands), the lower the turnout.

Ideological distinctiveness and turnout
We use the Manifesto Project's estimates of where each Labour and Conservative general election manifesto scores on a left-right scale to measure the absolute ideological difference between the two parties at each election from 1945 to 2015. A visual inspection suggests a weak positive effect (Figure 7a): in general, the further apart the parties were ideologically, the higher turnout tended to be. But the effect, while correctly signed, is not significant (table 1c, model I).

Fitting separate trend lines for the pre- and post-2000 periods suggests that the relationship is stronger after the millennium than before, and that the nature of the relationship changed (figure 7b). Before 2000, the trend line is very slightly negative, but after then it is clearly positive. But this is more apparent than real: while the dummy variable for post-2000 contest is significant (table 1c, model II), the interaction between it and the ideological difference measure is not (table 1c, model III). Although it is an intuitively appealing explanation of changing turnout, and of the fall in turnout after 2000, it does not pass empirical muster.

Our analysis relies on the ideological difference between Conservative and Labour as assessed on the basis of their manifesto commitments (as scored by academic researchers). Some previous analyses have operationalised this in different ways, for instance, by relying on voters' assessments of how far apart the parties are in a particular contest and find stronger evidence of a relationship between (perceived) ideological distinctiveness – that is, 'clear blue water' between the parties – and higher turnout (e.g. Pattie and Johnston, 2003). It could be that what matters is not the actual policy and political differences but what voters perceive those differences to be (though we lack measures of this across time).

Partisan attachment and turnout
Finally, we examine the effect of aggregate strength of partisanship within the electorate on voter turnout. To measure partisan attachment, we use the percentage of respondents to successive British Election Study post-election face-to-face surveys who report a 'very strong' identification with a party. That aggregate measure is positively related to turnout between 1964 and 2017: the more intensely partisan the electorate the higher the turnout (figure 8a). The effect is significant, and the r^2 value is the highest for any of the bivariate models examined here: the partisan identity measure accounts for a third of the variation in turnout (table 1d, model I).

That said, the scatterplot reveals that the relationship between turnout and the percentage with a very strong partisan identification is strikingly non-linear and a quadratic equation (with the standard errors of the coefficients in brackets: ** indicates that the coefficients are statistically significantly different from zero at the 0.05 level or better) fits the trend quite well:

Turnout =	38.03	+	2.44*VSPID	-	$0.04*VSPID^2$	$R^2 = 0.74$
	(6.34)**		(0.50)**		(0.01)**	

The higher the percentage of the electorate expressing a very strong sense of partisanship at an election, the higher the turnout, therefore. But as the proportion of very strong partisans rises, the quadratic term ($VSPID^2$) shows that diminishing returns set in and the increase in

turnout gets smaller (with even a hint of declining turnout setting in again at very high levels of partisan intensity).

Even more strikingly, there is a clear time dimension to this non-linearity, with steep increases in turnout for increases in the percentage of strong identifiers in the low partisanship contests of the post-2000 period, and much less variation in turnout as partisanship levels fluctuate in the pre-2000 contests. The interaction between intensity of partisanship and the post-2000 dummy variable is both significant and telling (table 1d, model III). There is a significant positive relationship between partisanship and turnout after 2000. But before the millennium, aggregate partisanship had no overall effect on turnout (figure 8b). Pushing the analysis further, it is clear that the failure of the partisanship measure to have an influence on turnout before 2000 is largely due to the five pre-1979 elections for which we have data on partisanship, all of which were marked by relatively high levels of partisanship. In the period for which we have data, partisanship among the UK electorate was at its strongest in the 1964, 1966 and 1970 contests. And even though dealignment had begun by 1974 (Särlvik and Crewe, 1983), it had not yet reached the levels experienced in later elections. Restricting the analysis to those elections in which 25% or less of the electorate reported identifying 'very strongly' with a political party (i.e. to the contests from 1979 to 2017 inclusive), produces the following regression model:

$$\begin{array}{lcll} \text{Turnout} = 43.32 & + & 1.53*\text{VSPID} & r^2 = 0.73 \\ \quad (5.73)^{**} & & (0.33)^{**} & \end{array}$$

In other words, there may be a threshold effect in operation. When more than a quarter of the electorate felt very strongly attached to a party, aggregate levels of partisan intensity had little effect on overall turnout. But once the proportion identifying very strongly with a party fell below this level, overall turnout became very sensitive to changing levels of partisanship.

Conclusions

Since the millennium, turnout at UK General Elections has remained stubbornly below the levels of the late twentieth century, slow recovery after 2001 notwithstanding. Nevertheless, as these analyses demonstrate, aggregate turnout patterns have been shaped by the competitiveness of the election. The closer the election, the higher the turnout. That said, the 2001 election acted as a sort of 'reset'. Turnout dropped dramatically from the levels of the late twentieth century, and then the long-term relationship between electoral competitiveness and turnout re-established itself, albeit at a lower level.

The puzzle, therefore, is to understand the 2001 'reset'. Our analyses of each potential argument suggest that (at least in the aggregate) two factors account for variations in national turnout levels at UK general elections. Firstly, turnout is higher in closer elections than in less competitive ones. And, secondly, once the proportion of voters expressing a strong identification with a party drops below around 25%, turnout fluctuates in accord with partisan intensity. The latter substantially accounts for the drop-off in overall turnout after 2000. Thus, our findings both corroborate and add to Heath's (2007) important results, by identifying a 'threshold effect' for the effect of partisan identification on turnout.

The 2001 'reset', therefore, begins to look increasingly like an artefact of a less intensively partisan electorate. At the aggregate level at least, intensity of partisanship only begins to exert an influence on turnout once overall partisanship drops below that threshold – as it did

in 2001. The reason why 25% or so of the electorate identifying as very strong partisans acts as a threshold is not clear, but this almost certainly links both to the general climate within which people vote (turnout is higher when people think most others in their communities are politically engaged: Pattie and Johnston, 2016) and to wider issues around disengagement and alienation from political elites (Jennings *et al*., 2017; Evans and Tilley, 2017).

Recovering turnout rates since 2001 reflect both modest increases in partisan intensity since then, and the renewed competitiveness of the UK's general elections, as the dominance established by New Labour at the turn of the century first declined and then disappeared. By 2017, General Election turnout had been increasing slowly for 16 unbroken years – an unprecedentedly long period of slow growth after the 'trendless fluctuation' of the earlier post -war decades. In short, the 2001 turnout 'reset' appears to be a watershed in UK electoral participation. Increasing electoral competitiveness alone will probably not return turnout to postwar levels. Achieving that would require not only closer contests but also a return to higher levels of partisanship in the electorate. And that, in these sceptical times, looks rather unlikely.

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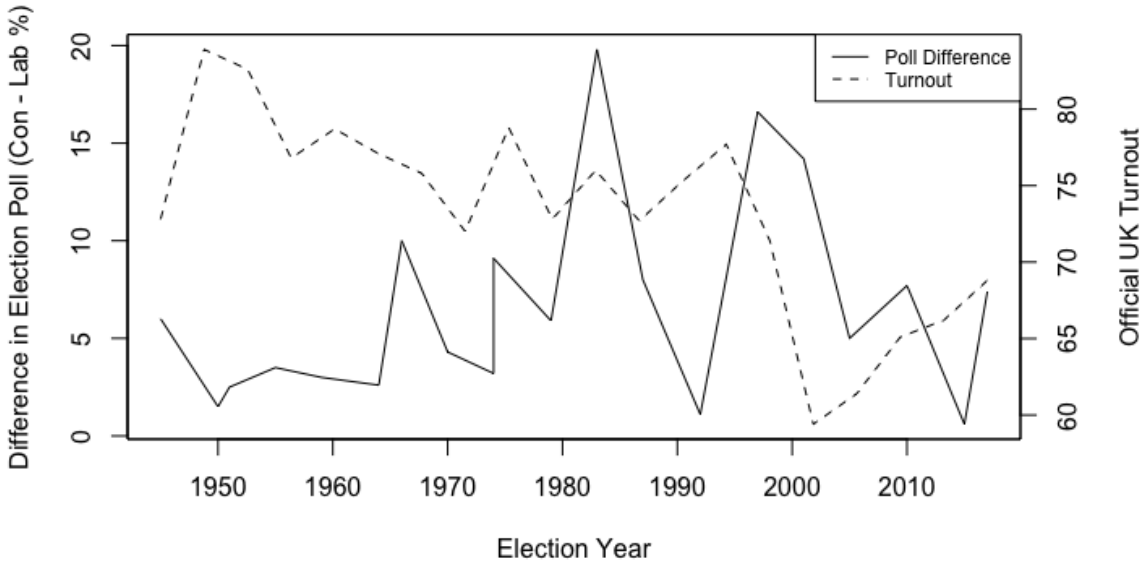
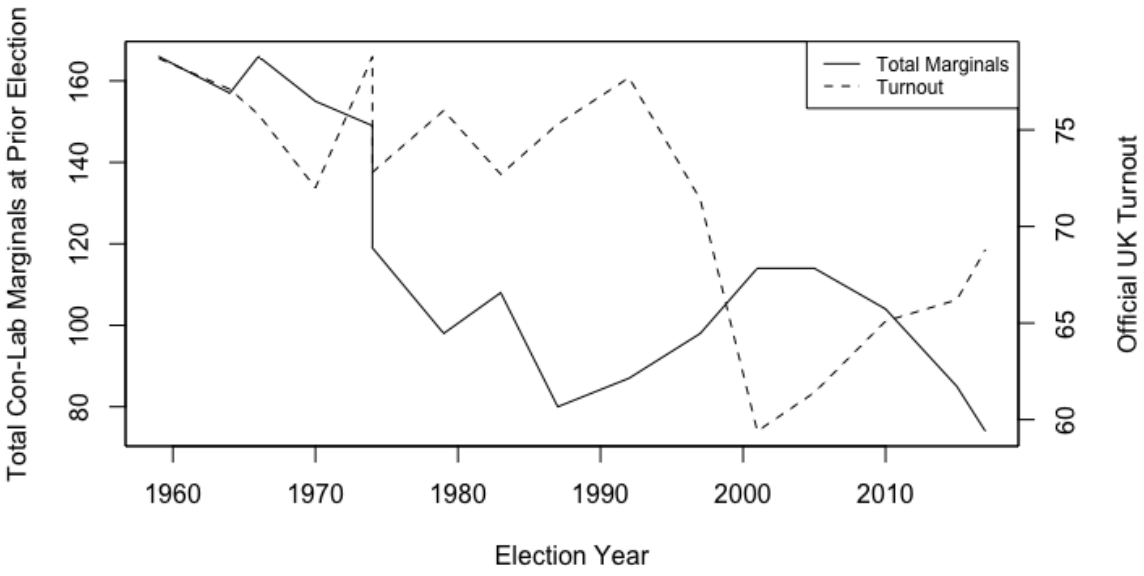
Figure 1: Average absolute percentage point difference between Conservative and Labour in final pre-election polls versus official UK turnout, 1945-2017



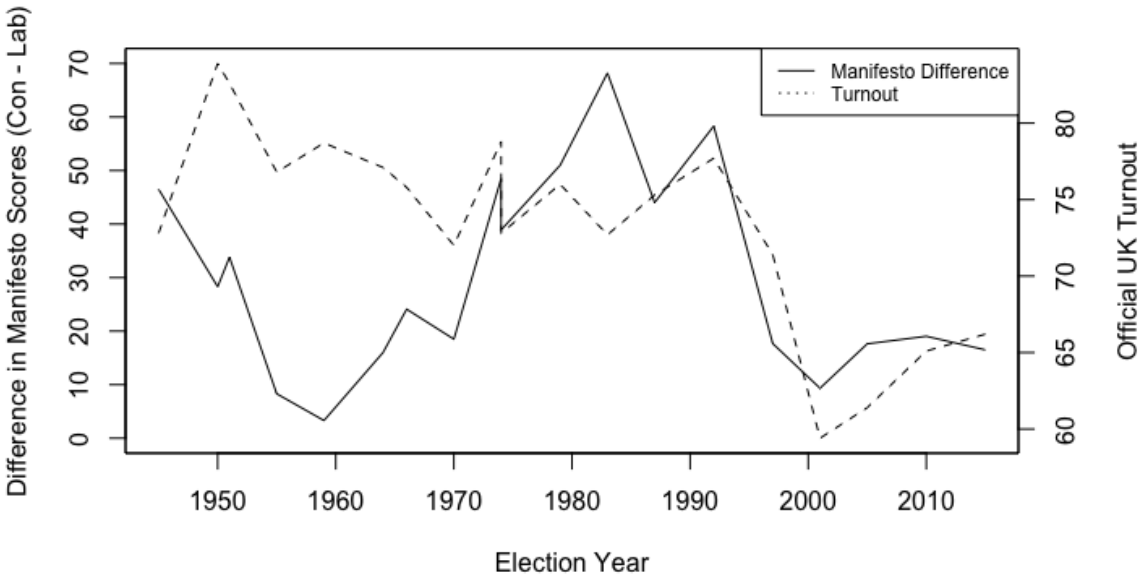
Note: Official UK turnout data are from Rallings and Thrasher (2012) and (for later elections) from the UK Electoral Commission. Polling data are from Rallings and Thrasher (2012) and from Anthony Wells' *UK Polling Report* website: http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/.

Figure 2: The total number of Conservative-Labour marginal seats at the prior election versus official UK turnout, 1959-2017



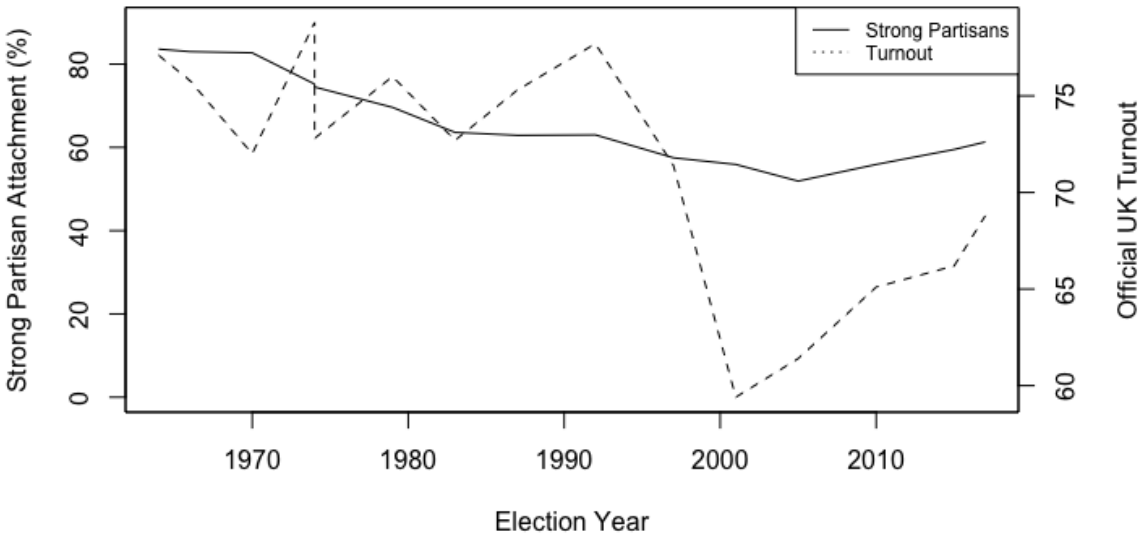
Note: Official UK turnout data are from Rallings and Thrasher (2012) and (for later elections) from the UK Electoral Commission. The number of Conservative-Labour marginals are derived from Curtice (2018, 32).

Figure 3: Absolute difference in Conservative-Labour manifesto (left-right) scores versus official UK turnout, 1945-2015.



Note: Manifesto data from Volkens et al. (2017); official UK turnout data are from the Electoral Commission. Official UK turnout data are from Rallings and Thrasher (2012) and (for later elections) from the UK Electoral Commission.

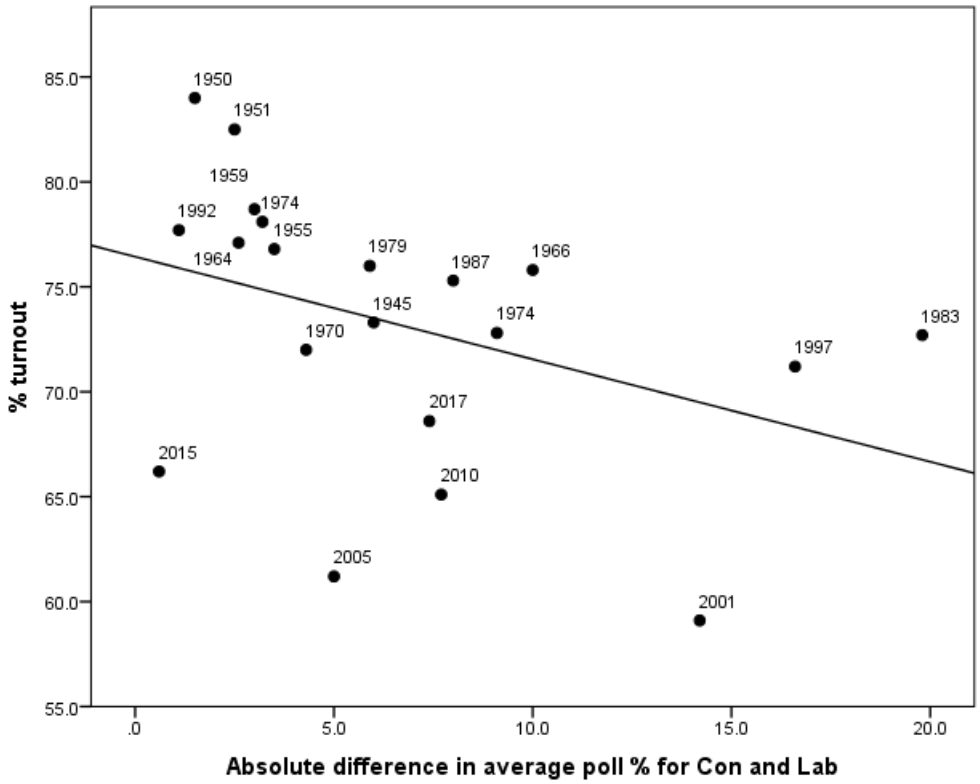
Figure 4: The changing strength of partisan attachments in Britain versus official UK turnout, 1964-2017.



Note: Party identification data from the British Election Study face-to-face post-election surveys; official UK turnout data are from Rallings and Thrasher (2012) and (for later elections) from the UK Electoral Commission.

Figure 5: Electoral competitiveness and turnout, 1945-2017

a) All elections



b) Differentiating between pre- and post-2000 contests

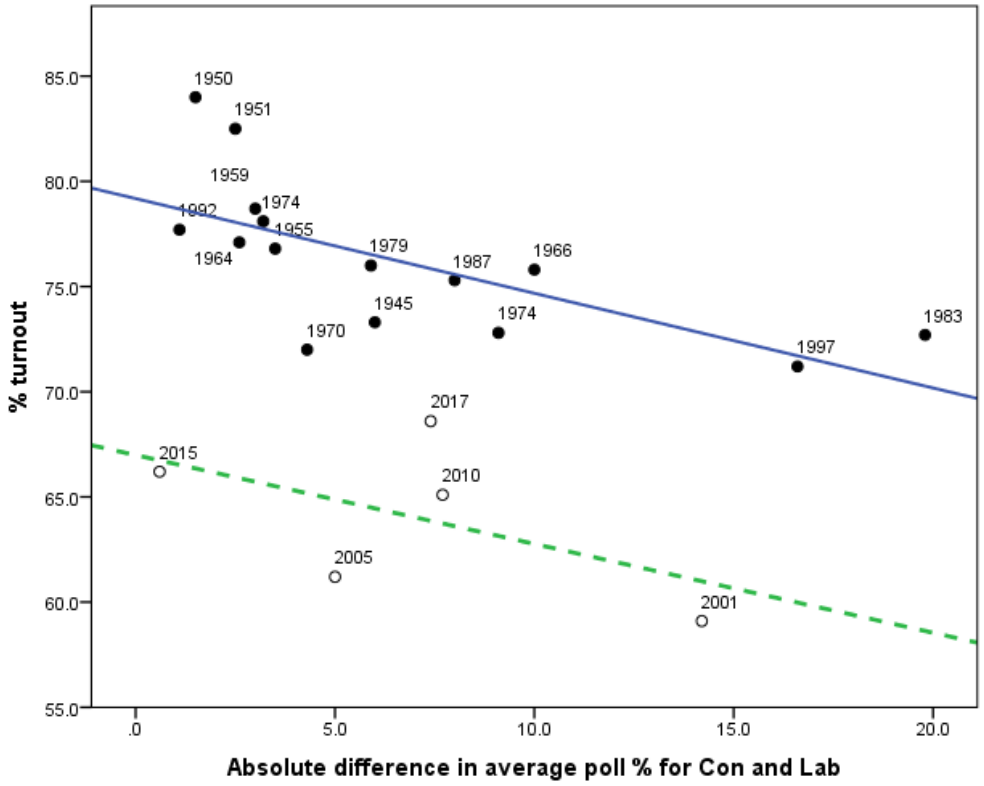
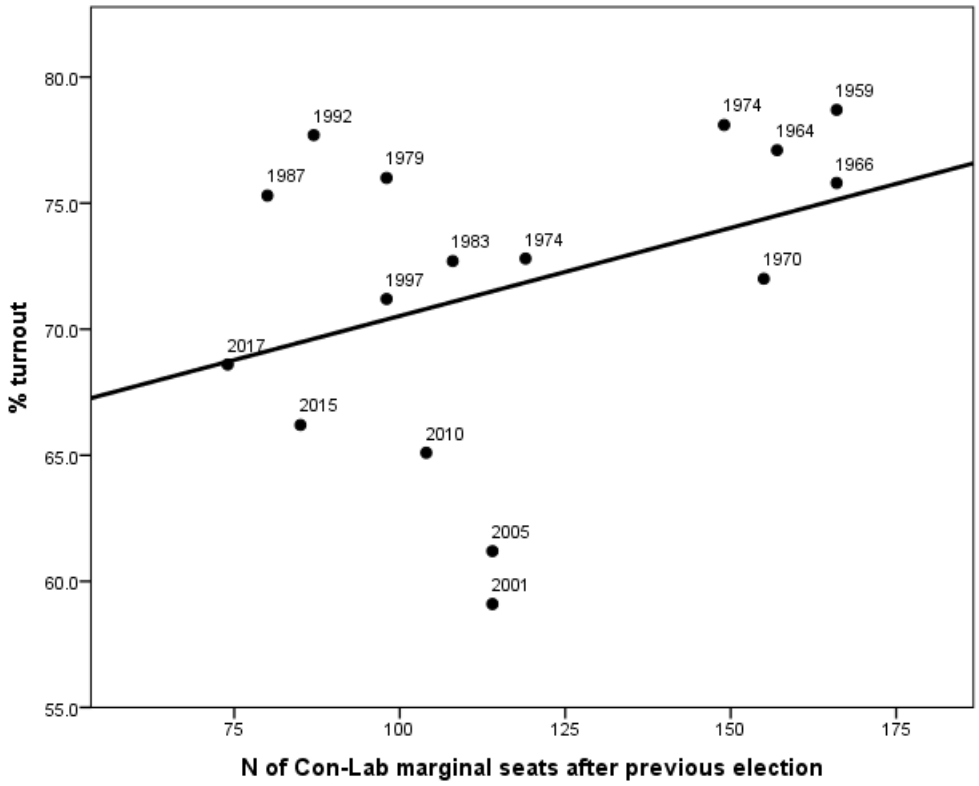


Figure 6: Number of marginals and turnout, 1959-2017

a) All elections



b) Differentiating between pre- and post-2000

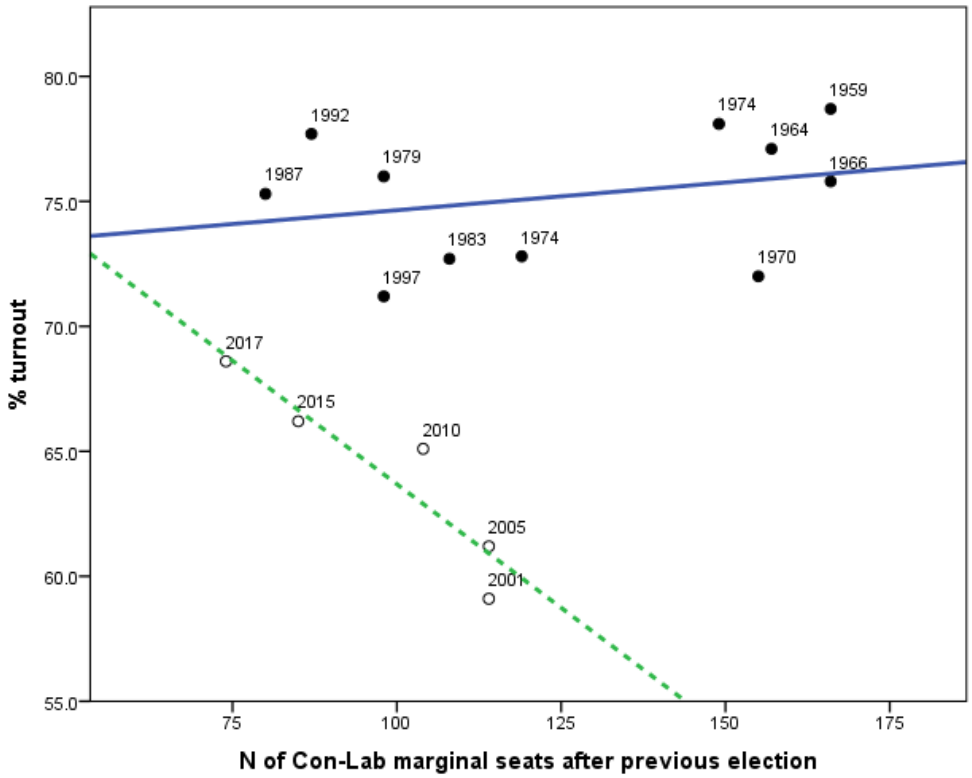
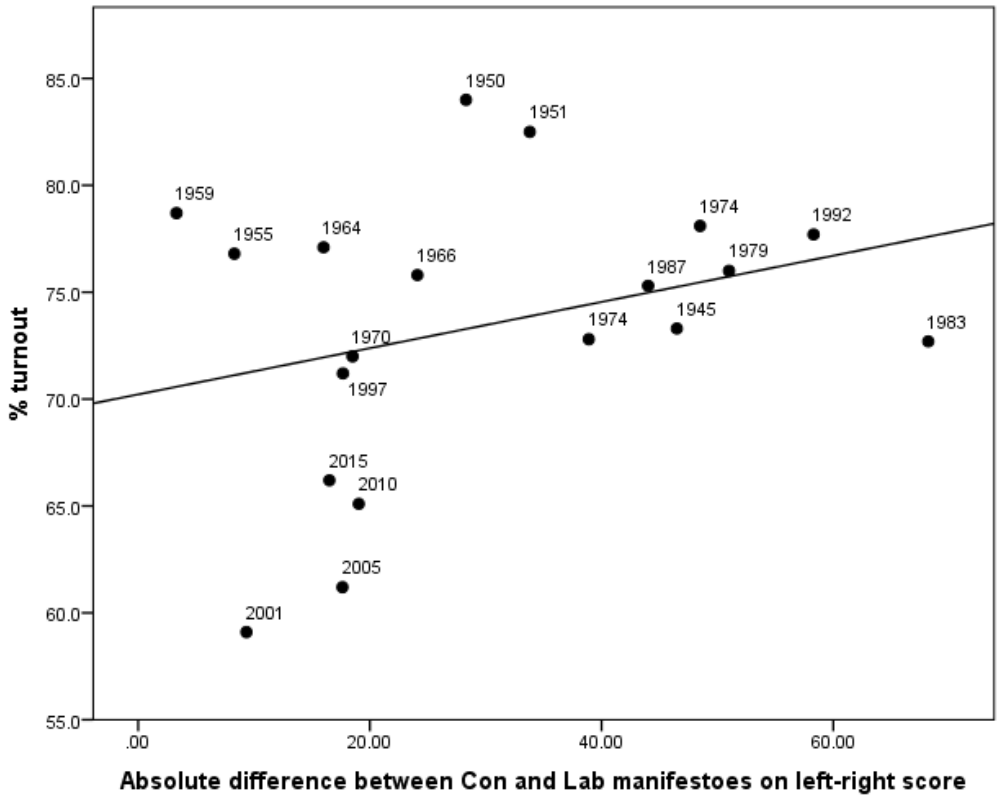


Figure 7 Ideological distance and turnout, 1945-2015

a) All elections



b) Differentiating between pre- and post-2000 contests

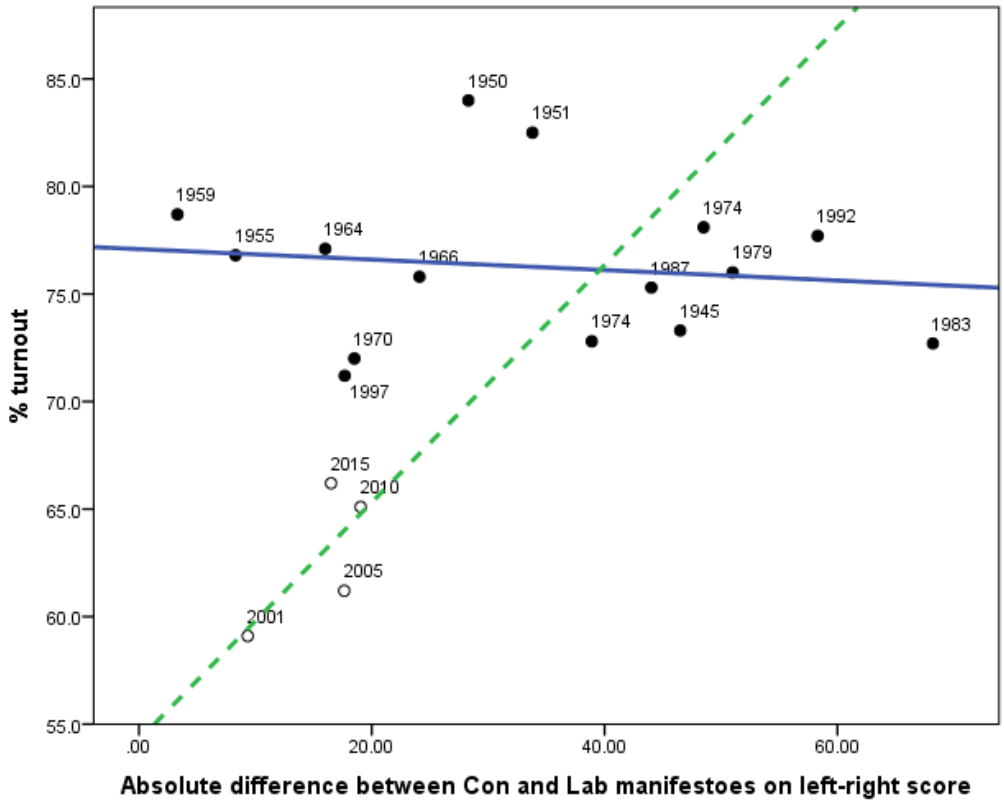
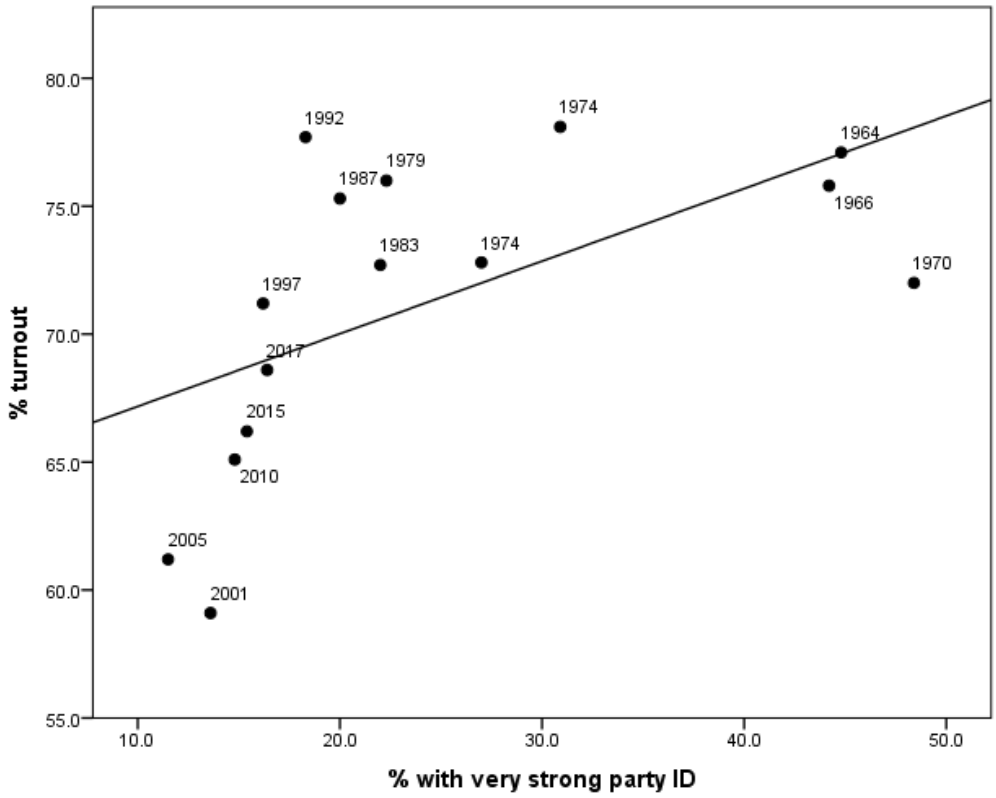


Figure 8 Percent with very strong party identifications and turnout, 1964-2017

a) All elections



b) Differentiating between pre- and post-2000 contests

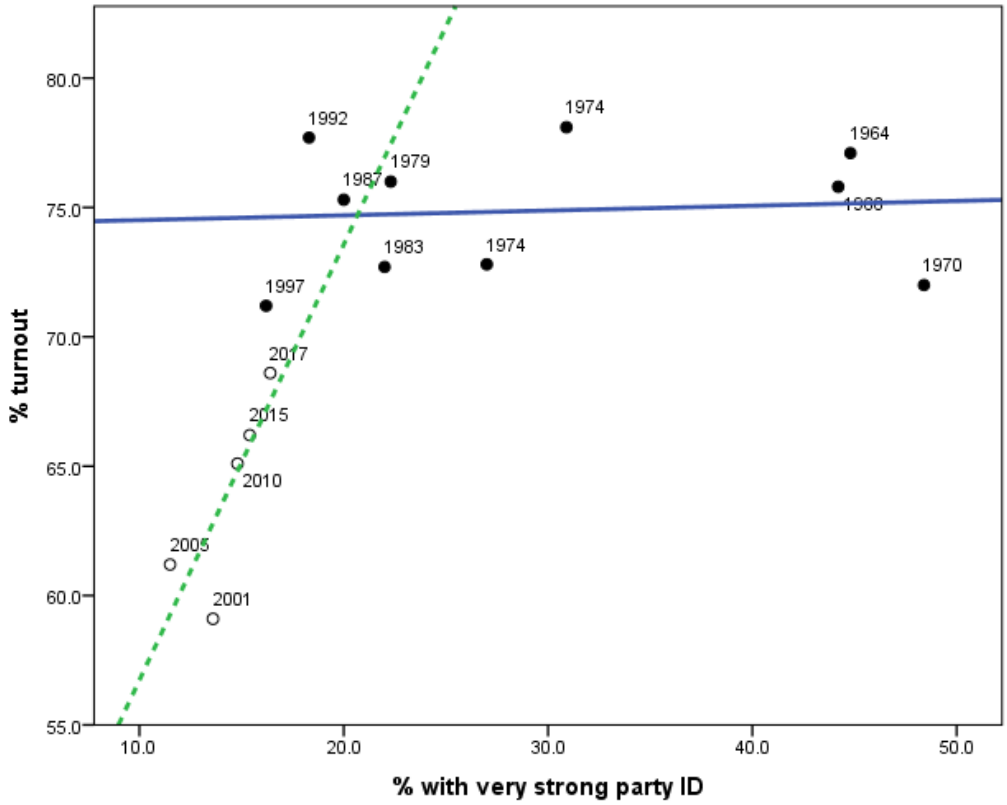


Table 1: Accounting for national turnout: regression models (standard errors in brackets)

	Y = % turnout		
	I	II	III
A) Electoral competiveness			
Constant	76.44**	79.15**	79.18**
	(2.25)	(1.12)	(1.23)
Abs poll difference, Con vs Lab	-0.49+	-0.45**	-0.46**
	(0.27)	(0.13)	(0.15)
Post-2000?		-12.00**	-12.19**
		(1.51)	(2.81)
Post-2000*Abs poll diff interaction			0.03
			(0.34)
R^2	0.15	0.82	0.82
N	20	20	20
B) Number of Con-Lab marginals, t-1			
Constant	63.54**	75.31**	72.43**
	(5.82)	(3.68)	(3.03)
N of, Con-Lab marginals, t-1	0.07	-0.00	0.02
	(0.05)	(0.03)	(0.02)
Post-2000?		-11.20**	11.03
		(1.87)	(7.46)
Post-2000*N C-L marginals, t-1			-0.22*
			(0.07)
R^2	0.13	0.73	0.84
N	16	16	16
C) Ideological distinctiveness			
Constant	70.22**	76.88**	77.09**
	(2.89)	(1.99)	(1.98)
Abs left-right difference, Con vs Lab	0.11	-0.02	-0.02
	(0.08)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Post-2000?		-13.69**	-22.81*
		(2.29)	(8.14)
Post-2000*Abs L-R diff interaction			0.58
			(0.49)
R^2	0.09	0.72	0.74
N	19	19	19
D) Party identification			
Constant	64.34**	73.80**	74.32**
	(3.03)	(2.67)	(2.27)
% with very strong party ID	0.28*	0.04	0.02
	(0.11)	(0.08)	(0.07)
Post-2000?		-10.28**	-34.43**
		(2.11)	(10.25)
Post-2000*VS party ID interaction			1.67*
			(0.70)

R^2	0.33	0.78	0.85
N	15	15	15

\+ Significant at p = 0.10
* Significant at p = 0.05
** Significant at p = 0.01